

# Keys to Successfully Sustaining an SSR Program

Practice is important in learning, maintaining, or improving any skills. Studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that students perform better when they do independent reading. In order to be a good reader, a person must practice reading, but reading practice declines markedly after fifth grade. As educators and parents, we must work to reverse this trend. Elissa Gootman wrote in the *New York Times* that, "In New York State, grade-by-grade testing conducted for the first time last year showed that in rich and poor districts alike, reading scores plunge from the fifth to sixth grade, when most students move to middle school, and continue to decline through

implement, but it requires attention and commitment to maintain. As with most things in education, program longevity is difficult to ensure. Sometimes longevity relates to learning more effective instructional practices or adapting to the evolving needs of the next generation. Often, however, SSR's long-term failure has more to do with maintaining the interest, focus, training, and re-training of the educators involved. We must consider then that the reason for the long-term loss of SSR programs is not inherent in the program itself. Rather, we must turn our attention to the flagging of motivation and attention to detail by those responsible for its implementation. With that in mind, let's examine some

- **SSR/Literacy Committee** – SSR can be run independently by an individual in a classroom, but building-wide implementation cannot be run by just one individual. Instead a committee should work together to implement the plan, provide staff and student training, and develop building-wide reading promotions and projects. This committee is, of course, important for the start-up year. Keep in mind, however, that its existence in perpetuity is absolutely crucial to keep reading in the hearts and minds of everyone all year long. The committee should include the library media specialist, an administrator, reading and language arts teachers representing various grade levels, as well as a few content area teachers. It is important to have other content areas included, because they will help ground the committee in the realities of the training needs, experience levels, and stressors felt by educators with none or minimal reading motivation and comprehension training. The committee should develop a yearlong plan with an eye on revising the plan annually for training, re-training, and building-wide reading programs, activities, and events.

- **Staff Commitment** – In any group effort, commitment and adhesion will foster success. With that in mind, be sure to involve staff members in all aspects of the program: the pre-planning, pre-training, follow-up training, and building-wide reading activities. It is essential to provide a well-equipped staff with time-tested strategies to incorporate SSR into the classroom: booktalks, read alouds, think aloud/talk aloud activities, anticipation statements, and so forth. Through a survey developed by the SSR/Literacy Committee, assess the staff each semester about its attitudes, opinions, training requests, and suggestions related to past, current, and future building-wide training, reading promotion, and reading motivation projects.

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eighth grade. The pattern is increasingly seen as a critical impediment to tackling early high school dropout rates as well as the achievement gap separating black and white students" (1). Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is designed to provide reading experiences and practice that often does not occur in the busy schedules of America's young adolescents.

Sustained Silent Reading in any of its various forms or formulas is easy to

key strategies and tools to foster the successful maintenance of a classroom-level or building-wide SSR program:

- **Administration** – The success of SSR as an ongoing instructional practice is enhanced with the support of grade-level, building, and district administration. Administrators show support through verbal encouragement, supporting training opportunities, getting involved in and permitting school-wide reading programs and events, enlisting the advice and assistance of reading experts in their building and school district, keeping SSR in the building's long-range plan, and establishing a building SSR/Literacy Committee, as well as providing that committee with ongoing support.



By Dr. Jack Humphrey and Leslie B. Preddy

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- **Classroom Bookshelves** – Students need to be surrounded by books. Each classroom should have a classroom bookshelf of 50-75 books available to students. For reading to succeed in the hearts and minds of students for the long term, they need to see books and reading as an integral component to any and all classrooms. Every classroom, no matter the subject, is important for setting the tone and modeling how effective readers surround themselves with books. These books should not have any checkout procedure and should be used on the honor system.

- **SSR Lending Library** – Classroom bookshelves grow stale, so approximately once every six to nine weeks, they should be returned to the SSR Lending Library and exchanged for new materials. Maintain an SSR Lending Library bookshelf for staff to trade classroom bookshelf materials with books donated by students or purchased at a discount. Again, these books do not need to be checked out by students, nor the sharing and use monitored. Use the honor system, and when books do disappear, just be grateful the book found a new home. The SSR Lending Library can be stored in a closet, on spare shelves in a workroom or office, or even in plastic containers. If the SSR Lending Library begins to run low on books, think of creative ways to supplement the collection through used book drives and donation requests.

- **School Library Media Center** – A well-stocked, well-staffed School Library Media Center is vital to a successful SSR program. The Media Center maintains a large, organized, and searchable collection for student and staff use. The library media specialist is an important asset who monitors reading trends, promotes classics, and keeps abreast of newly published quality literature. Students and teachers can work with the library media specialist to develop reading

recommendations and suggest reading lists for other students. Classrooms should make regular, classroom teacher-supervised visits to the library media center for self-selected, free-choice reading material.

- **SSR Time** – Make reading and SSR time a constant and natural part of the school day. Building-wide SSR time should be considered sacred and never interrupted or replaced by other activities, except in an emergency, such as a two-hour delay or convocation. If built-in SSR time is replaced in order to complete a classroom activity, survey, or test, it will be detrimental to students' reading attitudes. Students will begin or continue to consider reading an unimportant and replaceable activity because that will be the message conveyed.

- **Culture of Reading** – Throughout the year, promote reading and motivate readers with reading public awareness campaigns. Involve the entire school in reading activities and games. Participate in national programs, such as Read Across America and National Library Week, as well as a building-level event, like One Book, One School. Allow opportunities for students and educators to promote reading through themed book displays throughout the building and booktalks over student announcements. Help your school find its own reading voice and creative ways to encourage life-long readers.

- **Keep the Momentum** – Year after year, continue educator, parent, and student awareness of SSR and the importance of reading. Educator training is an endless journey of growth and discovery. Even if you have enjoyed success over the past few years, never take your focus off the importance of reading, and never take the reading culture in your building for granted. As educators, we sometimes get bored with what we're doing year after year, but don't let adult boredom ruin the

importance and value of SSR for the students. Annually, remind staff through awareness activities and re-trainings. If a reading promotion idea is successful, make it a tradition. To keep the program and training invigorated, send the library media specialist and other SSR/Literacy committee members to state and national conferences to gather ideas, skills, and book awareness. Send reading-related ideas, suggestions, and announcements home to parents via the student newsletter. Show students how to become better readers through modeling reading strategies, reading aloud, and thinking aloud activities. Remember, it's up to you to keep everyone's focus on the importance of reading.

Building strong reading skills is a complex task, particularly by the time students reach the middle grades. Successful reading achievement requires time, attention, and resources. Young adolescent reading skills need to be taught and practiced, and SSR is one proven way to provide reading practice. It is serious business to acknowledge current problems and to put forth a sustained effort to provide reading practice. But with the use of key SSR strategies, students will be in a better position to be successful readers. ■

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